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Child Support: An Overview of Census Bureau Data on Recipients

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Summary

The national Census Bureau data show that in 2011, 14.4 million parents had custody of children under age 21 while the other parent lived elsewhere, and the aggregate amount of child support received was $23.6 billion. In 2011, 82% of custodial parents were mothers. Of all custodial parents, 50% were white, 25% were black, 21% were Hispanic, 18% were married, 33% were divorced, 35% were never married, 15% did not have a high school diploma, 17% had at least a bachelor's degree, 50% worked full-time year-round, 29% had family income below poverty, and 39% received some type of public assistance. In 2011, only 2.7 million (38%) of the nearly 7.1 million custodial parents with child support orders actually received the full amount of child support that was owed to them. The average yearly child support payment received by custodial parents with payments was $5,160 for mothers and $4,433 for fathers. These full or partial payments represented 17% of the custodial mothers' total yearly income and 11% of the custodial fathers'. Compared to 1993 Census data, less child support was received by custodial parents in 2011 ($23.9 billion in 1993 versus $23.6 billion in 2011; in 2011 dollars). However, a higher percentage of those owed child support actually received all that they were due (36.9% in 1993 versus 43.4% in 2011).

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Introduction

The United States Census Bureau periodically collects national survey information on child support. By interviewing a random sample of single-parent families, the Census Bureau is able to generate an array of data that is useful in assessing the performance of noncustodial parents in paying their child support. Although the Census Bureau has been collecting child support information in a special Child Support Supplement to the April Current Population Survey (CPS) biennially since 1978, the supplement survey has changed significantly over the years. According to the Census Bureau, the most recent data, from 2011,[1] are comparable only back to 1993.[2] During the early years of the survey, information was collected only from custodial mothers. Beginning with the 1991 data, information was also collected from custodial fathers. This report presents unsegmented data with respect to custodial mothers and fathers (i.e., custodial parents data). The survey population includes all persons who have their own children under age 21 living with them, while the other parent lives outside the household.

The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program was enacted in 1975 as a federal-state program (Title IV-D of the Social Security Act) to help strengthen families by securing financial support for children from their noncustodial parent on a consistent and continuing basis, and by helping some families to remain self-sufficient and off public assistance by providing the requisite CSE services. The CSE program is administered by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and funded by general revenues. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands operate CSE programs and are entitled to federal matching funds. The CSE program provides seven major services on behalf of children: (1) parent location, (2) paternity establishment, (3) establishment of child support orders, (4) review and modification of child support orders, (5) collection of child support payments, (6) distribution of child support payments, and (7) establishment and enforcement of medical child support. The CSE program is estimated to handle at least 50% of all child support cases; the remaining cases are handled by private attorneys, collection agencies, or through mutual agreements between the parents.

In FY2011, the CSE program collected $27.3 billion in child support payments (from noncustodial parents) and served 15.8 million child support cases. The national Census Bureau data show that the aggregate amount of child support received in 2011 was $23.6 billion,[3] and that 14.4 million parents had custody of children under age 21 while the other parent lived elsewhere.[4]

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[1] U.S. Census Bureau, *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2011*. Current Population Reports, P60-246, by Timothy S. Grall, October 2013, http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-246.pdf. To view detailed tables, see https://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs11.html and click on 2011 detailed tables icon.

[2] Due to space limitations, **Table 1** does not display data for 1995.

[3] It is not surprising that the amount of child support received based on Census bureau data is less the amount of child support collected based on state CSE data because custodial parents responding to the Census survey are often unaware of child support received by the state on their behalf if they are recipients of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In other words, the amount of child support received by TANF parents is probably underreported because many states retain some or all of the child support collected on behalf of such families.

[4] Note that the OCSE defines a CSE "case" as a noncustodial parent (mother, father, or putative/alleged father) who is now or eventually may be obligated under law for the support of a child or children receiving services under the CSE program. If the noncustodial parent owes support for two children by different women, that would be considered two cases; if both children have the same mother, that would be considered one case. Thus, the CSE program caseload may be larger than the national number of custodial parents potentially eligible for child support payments.

In 2011, 82% of custodial parents were mothers. Of all custodial parents, 50% were white, 25% were black, 21% were Hispanic, 18% were married, 33% were divorced, 35% were never married, 15% did not have a high school diploma, 18% had at least a bachelor's degree, 50% worked full-time year-round, 29% had family income below poverty, and 39% received some type of public assistance (i.e., Medicaid, food stamps, public housing or rent subsidy, TANF, or general assistance).

Child Support Awarded and Received

Table 1 summarizes several child support indicators from biennial survey data for selected years from 1993 through 2011. The table shows that the likelihood of having a child support award, being legally entitled to a child support payment, and actually receiving at least one child support payment decreased over the 19-year period from 1993 through 2011. In contrast, the percentage of noncustodial parents (owed child support) who received the full amount of the child support that they were owed increased by almost 18%, from 37% in 1993 to 43% in 2011.

Table 1. Child Support Award and Receipt, Selected Years, 1993-2011

	1993	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	Percent Change (1993-2011)
All custodial parents (numbers in thousands)	13,690	13,949	13,529	13,383	13,951	13,605	13,743	13,672	14,440	5.5%
Custodial parents awarded child support (thousands)	7,800	7,876	7,945	7,916	8,376	7,802	7,428	6,914	7,057	-9.5%
Percent awarded child support	57.0%	56.5%	58.7%	59.1%	60.0%	57.3%	54.0%	50.6%	48.9%	-14.2%
Custodial parents due/owed child support (numbers in thousands)	6,688	7,018	6,791	6,924	7,256	6,809	6,375	5,897	6,262	-6.4%
Percent of those owed who received any payment	75.8%	75.3%	73.7%	73.9%	76.5%	77.2%	76.3%	70.8%	74.1%	-2.2%
Percent of those owed who received full payment	36.9%	46.2%	45.1%	44.7%	45.3%	46.9%	46.8%	41.2%	43.4%	17.6%
Average child support due	$5,489	$5,796	$6,418	$6,408	$6,242	$6,433	$5,803	$6,244	$6,052	10.3%
Average child support received	$3,583	$3,862	$3,767	$4,014	$4,279	$4,197	$3,638	$3,811	$3,771	5.2%

	1993	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	Percent Change (1993-2011)
Aggregate Child Support Payments (in billions of dollars)										
Child support due	$36.6	$40.7	$43.6	$44.3	$45.2	$43.8	$37.0	$36.8	$37.9	3.6%
Child support received	$23.9	$27.1	$25.6	$27.8	$31.1	$28.6	$23.2	$22.4	$23.6	-1.3%
Child support deficit	$12.7	$13.6	$18.0	$16.5	$14.2	$15.2	$13.8	$14.4	$14.3	12.6%
Percent of amount due actually received	65.3%	66.6%	58.7%	62.8%	68.8%	65.3%	62.7%	60.9%	62.3%	-4.6%

Source: Table prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 1996-2012. All child support income amounts were adjusted by the Census Bureau to reflect 2011 dollars using the CPI-U-RS. Custodial parents include all persons living with their own children who are under age 21 while the other parent lives somewhere else.

Note: The difference between the number of custodial parents who were awarded child support and those who were due or owed child support is composed of persons who were no longer owed child support because their child was (or children were) too old, the noncustodial parent had died, the family lived together for part of the year before the survey interview, or some other reason. (To clarify, in 2011, 7.1 million custodial parents were awarded child support, but only 6.3 million were due (or owed) child support. The 0.8 million-person difference was composed of persons who were no longer due child support because of the reasons listed above.)

In 2011, about 49% of the 14.4 million custodial parents (with children under age 21) were awarded child support.[5] Of those who were actually *due* child support payments (6.3 million), about 74% of them received at least one payment, and 43% received all that they were owed. In 2011, only 2.7 million (19%) of the 14.4 million custodial parents *eligible* for child support actually received the full amount of child support that was owed to them. In 2011, the average child support payment amounted to about $3,771,[6] 5% higher than the average child support payment in 1993 ($3,583).

In 2011, 62% of the $37.9 billion in aggregate child support due was actually paid. In 1993, 65% of the nearly $37 billion (adjusted for inflation, in 2011 dollars) in child support due was paid. During the 19-year period 1993 through 2011, after adjusting for inflation, aggregate child support due fluctuated from a low of $36.6 billion in 1993 to a high of $45.2 billion in 2003. But, over the entire period, aggregate child support due increased by about 4%, total child support

[5] Conversely, the reader should note that many custodial parents do not receive child support. In 2011, this included 51% of custodial parents who were not awarded child support and 11% of custodial parents who did not receive any child support payments even though they had been awarded child support. In 2011, this number amounted to almost 8.7 million custodial parents. Some of the reasons given as to why there was not a legal child support obligation included the following: the other parent provided what he or she could (37%); the other parent could not afford to pay (33%); they did not feel the need to make it legal (33%); they did not want the other parent to pay (24%); they did not want to have contact with the other parent (19%); the child stayed with the other parent part of the time (18%); they could not locate the other parent (17%); and paternity was not legally established (7%).

[6] This amount reflects total child support payments received divided by the number of parents who *were owed/due* payments ($23,600,000,000/6,262,000=$3,769—total different because of rounding). **Table 2** shows an average child support payment of $5,135 for custodial parents who *actually received* at least one child support payment in 2011 ($23,600,000,000/4,641,000=$5,085—total different because of rounding).

received decreased a little over 1%, and the amount left unpaid increased almost 13% (see **Table 1**).

Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Custodial Parents Who Were Awarded or Who Received Child Support Payments in 2011

While sex, race, marital status, and education are significant factors in predicting whether a custodial parent will be issued a child support order, award rates tend to be significantly lower than receipt rates. For example, although female custodial parents were almost 1.9 times more likely to be awarded child support in 2011 as their male counterparts, among parents who were owed/due child support, both had at least a 68% chance of actually receiving child support payments. (See **Table 2**.) Moreover, in 2011, 40% of black custodial parents were awarded child support compared to 54% of white custodial parents. Even so, 73% of black custodial parents who were owed/due child support actually received child support payments and 75% of white custodial parents who were owed child support actually received child support payments in 2011. Similarly, while only 41% of never-married parents were awarded child support in 2011, almost 70% of never-married parents who were owed child support actually received child support payments in 2011. Also, 42% of custodial parents without a high school diploma were awarded child support, while 67% of custodial parents without a high school diploma who were owed child support actually received child support.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Custodial Parents by Child Support Award and Receipt Status, 2011

(numbers in thousands)

				Custodial Parents Who Received at Least Some Child Support in 2011		
	Total	% Awarded Child Support	Total Due Child Support	% of Those Due Child Support	Average Child Support ($)	Average Income ($)
All custodial parents	14,440	48.9	6,262	74.1	5,088	31,517
Sex						
Male	2,643	28.84	674	68.1	4,433	42,042
Female	11,797	53.4	5,588	74.8	5,160	30,363
Race and Ethnicity						
White (non-Hispanic)	9,829	53.5	4,664	75.0	5,194	32,156
Black	3,677	40.4	1,265	73.1	4,524	27,517
Hispanic	3,021	51.8	1,202	67.9	4,634	22,119
Marital Status						
Married	2,630	54.4	1,276	74.5	4,549	28,087
Divorced	4,772	55.9	2,404	76.7	5,777	38,733

	Total	% Awarded Child Support	Total Due Child Support	Custodial Parents Who Received at Least Some Child Support in 2011		
				% of Those Due Child Support	Average Child Support ($)	Average Income ($)
Separated	1,813	44.3	666	77.0	5,124	31,246
Never married	5,060	41.0	1,857	69.6	4,497	24,102
Educational Attainment						
No high school diploma	2,183	42.0	800	66.5	3,811	12,319
High school graduate	4,557	46.1	1,809	71.0	5,028	23,776
Some college—no degree	3,391	51.7	1,581	76.7	4,599	27,135
Associate's degree	1,681	56.7	844	76.2	4,769	32,728
Bachelor's degree or more	2,628	50.7	1,228	78.9	6,692	56,997
Economic Characteristics						
Family income below 2009 poverty level	4,180	47.7	1,707	72.7	4,503	8,676
Worked full-time, year-round	7,289	48.3	3,160	74.6	5,061	46,308
Received public assistance	5,675	48.4	2,389	71.0	4,480	14,978

Source: Table prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2012.

This pattern also held for the economic factors listed in **Table 2**—in that once a child support obligation was awarded, the probability of actually receiving payments rose significantly for all categories of custodial parents. In 2011, nearly 48% of custodial parents with incomes below the poverty level were awarded child support, and nearly 73% of those owed/due payments actually received child support payments. **Table 2** also shows that 48% of custodial parents who worked full-time year-round were awarded child support, while almost 75% of those owed received child support payments. Similarly, about 48% of custodial parents who received public assistance were awarded child support, while 71% of those who were owed child support payments actually received child support payments.[7]

Of the categories of custodial parents presented in **Table 2**, custodial parents who had an associate's degree followed by custodial parents who were divorced were the categories of parents most likely to be *awarded* child support. In 2011, 56.7% of custodial parents with an associate's degree and 55.9% of divorced custodial parents were awarded child support. The table also shows that custodial parents with at least a bachelor's degree who were owed/due child

[7] Public assistance program participation includes receiving at least one of the following: Medicaid, food stamps, public housing or rent subsidy, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or general assistance.

support was the category of parents most likely to *receive* child support payments in 2011. In 2011, 78.9% of custodial parents with at least a bachelor's degree who were owed payments actually received child support payments.

In 2011, the average yearly child support payment received by custodial parents with payments was $5,088; $5,160 for mothers and $4,433 for fathers. These full or partial payments represented (on average) 16% of the custodial parent's yearly income, 17% of the custodial mothers' total yearly income, and 11% of the custodial fathers'.

In 2011, for custodial parents with income below the poverty level, child support payments for those who received them made up, on average, 52% of their yearly income. In 2011, child support payments made up 31% of the yearly income of custodial parents without a high school diploma who were owed child support and who actually received full or partial payments. In 2011, child support represented 20% of the income of the 2.7 million custodial parents who received all of the child support that they were owed.[8]

The Census Bureau data also include information on health insurance. In 2011, 52% of the 7.1 million custodial parents with child support awards had awards that included health insurance. The noncustodial parent provided the health insurance coverage in 41.7% of the awards with health insurance provisos and in 13.7% of the awards without health insurance stipulations. Moreover, the noncustodial parent provided health insurance coverage for 17.8% of the nearly 7.4 million custodial parents who did not have a child support award.[9] Overall, 3.2 million noncustodial parents provided health care for their children in 2011.[10] This represented 22.4% of the 14.4 million children under age 21 who were living with a custodial parent while their other parent lived elsewhere.

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[8] See Table 6 at https://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/files/chldsu11.pdf (p. 17 of 50).

[9] U.S. Census Bureau, *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2009*, Current Population Reports, P60-240, by Timothy S. Grall, October 2013, http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-246.pdf (p. 12) or Table 8 of the detailed tables, https://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/files/chldsu11.pdf (p. 35 of 50).

[10] In 2011, nearly 1.5 million noncustodial parents provided health care insurance in cases where it was stipulated in the child support agreement, 0.4 million provided health care insurance in cases where it was not required by the agreement, and 1.3 million provided health care insurance in cases where there was no child support agreement.